

The Composition of World Religions

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The world's religions can be pictured as spokes radiating from a central core of undifferentiated Divine Essence (called by different names in different traditions) toward a periphery which represents a kind of outer darkness of ignorance and superficiality. Different beings and states of awareness can be placed along these spokes on a continuum from high to low, deep to shallow or near to far. Perhaps oddly from the physical point of view, in matters of consciousness, what is deepest is also highest.

A slight shift in perspective enables us to view these states and stages of awareness in levels, like a cross section of a layer cake. Religious thinkers are not alone in conceiving existence as progressive stratifications of layers and levels though, as Huston Smith points out¹, western thought since the 18th Century has substituted a hierarchy of quantity for a hierarchy of quality. While the universe is still seen as a range of levels and layers, physical size and power have replaced wisdom, love, truth, and beauty as the determinates of high and low. Some exceptions to this general drift can be found in psychology and related fields. In *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development*, Ken Wilbur writes:

Modern developmental psychology has, on the whole, simply devoted itself to the exploration and explanation of the various levels, stages, and strata

¹ "The Way Things Are" Huston Smith, in *Consciousness: Brain, States of Awareness, and Mysticism* Daniel Godlman and Richard J. Davidson, eds.

of the human constitution—mind, personality, psycho-sexuality, character, consciousness. The cognitive studies of Piaget (294) and Werner (393), the works of Loevinger (243) and Arieti (7) and Maslow (262) and Jakobson (196), the moral development studies of Kohlberg (229)—all subscribe, in whole or in part, to the concept of stratified stages of increasing differentiation, integration, and unity².

Wilbur goes on to pose an interesting question. “Having said that much, we are at once entitled to ask, ‘What, then, is the highest stage of unity to which one may aspire?’ ” Acknowledging that there is some difficulty in “finding examples of truly higher-order personalities—and in deciding exactly what constitutes a higher order personality in the first place,” he continues

Nonetheless, those few gifted souls who have bothered to look at this problem have suggested that the world’s great mystics and sages represent some of the very highest, if not the highest, of all stages of human development. Bergson said exactly that; and so did Toynbee, and Tolstoy and James and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and Maslow.”³

Each religion has its own perspectives and terminology; nevertheless, while religious believers on the outer edges of the circle are in emphatic and sometimes violent disagreement with each other, it is easily demonstrated that remarkable unanimity exists across religions on most matters among those nearer the center.

Their common set of core beliefs, called *Sanatana Dharma* by Hinduism, the Perennial Philosophy by Huxley, and the Religion of Abraham by Islam, is seen as the inborn religion that existed before the laws and details that came

² Wilbur, Ken. *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development*

³ Wilbur, Ken. *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development*, pp. 2-3

with specific dispensations. Those who share these core beliefs are known to one school of thought as Traditionalists, those who follow the Primordial Tradition.⁴

The person who says, “There is only one religion,” may mean either of two opposite things depending on whether they speak from near the center or near the periphery. The statement may mean, “Mine is the only real religion—your religions are all false superstitions,” or it may mean what 19th Century Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna described:

A lake has several *ghats*. At one the Hindus take water in pitchers and call it ‘*jal*’; at another Mussalmans take water and call it ‘*pani*’. At a third Christians call it ‘water’. Can we imagine that it is not ‘*jal*’, but only ‘*pani*’ or ‘water’? How ridiculous! The substance is One under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament and name create differences⁵

A Sufi story told by Sheikh Muzaffer (Ozak) al-Jerrahi makes the same point . Three men are arguing about whether to use their money to buy *anab*, *ankur* or *uzum*. A sage tells them, “Give me your money and I will satisfy you all.” He takes the money and buys grapes, the fruit they were all asking for under different names.

Proponents of this Primordial Tradition whatever their religious affiliation assert that it is universal and basic to humanity and to the nature of existence. “These forms may be Eastern or Western, but under the appearance of diversity there is always a basis of unity, at least, wherever true metaphysics exists, for the

⁴ Needleman, Jacob, ed. *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*

⁵ “M.” (Mahendranath Gupta), Swami Nikhilananda trans., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

simple reason that truth is one.”⁶ And, “Tradition or religion in its universal sense (*al-din*) is inherent in the human state⁷.

According to Aldous Huxley

More than twenty-five centuries have passed since that which has been called the Perennial Philosophy was first committed to writing; and in the course of those centuries it has found expression, now partial, now complete, now in this form, now in that, again and again. In Vedanta and Hebrew prophecy, in the Tao Te Ching and the Platonic dialogues, in the Gospel according to St. John and Mahayana theology, in Plotinus and the Areopagite, among the Persian Sufis and the Christian mystics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—the Perennial Philosophy has spoken almost all the languages of Asia and Europe and has made use of the terminology and traditions of every one of the higher religions.

But under all this confusion of tongues and myths, of local histories and particularist doctrines, there remains a Highest Common Factor, which is the Perennial Philosophy in what may be called its chemically pure state The records left by those who have known it in this way [through contemplation and personal transcendence] make it abundantly clear that all of them, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew, Taoist, Christian or Muslim, were attempting to describe the same essentially indescribably Fact⁸.

What are these core beliefs that bind together the mystics, saints and sages of the great world religions, as well as other teachers, believers and traditions too numerous to mention? Huxley defines the basics succinctly

At the core of the Perennial Philosophy we find four fundamental doctrines.

First: the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness—the world of things and animals and men and even gods—is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be nonexistent.

Second: human beings are capable not merely of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known.

Third: man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a man, if he so desires, to identify himself with the

⁶ Guenon, Rene. “Oriental Metaphysics,” *The Sword of Gnosis*, pp. 40.

⁷ Sayed Hussein Nasr, “Who is Man?”, *The Sword of Gnosis*, p.209

⁸ Prabhavananda, S., and Isherwood, C. *Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God*, Introduction, pp. 5-6.

spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with spirit.

Fourth: man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.⁹ ["Man" here obviously means "person," including women; this was the common usage until fairly recently.]

There is also substantial agreement about what might be called the *terrain* of the spiritual journey, its landmarks and obstacles, and about which methods are effective. Some of these propositions may sound odd to the newcomer, but they have been known and accepted by millions around the world for millenia.

Among proponents it is generally agreed that

- Reality is fundamentally "One without a second" – a divine unity.
- Human beings come from the divine but have forgotten their origin after becoming involved with the phenomenal worlds. The process of return is a process of remembering.
- Human (or all) existence consists of a journey outward and downward from the divine core and a return journey up and back again. This is a process of involution and evolution, as if the Creator breaths creation out and breaths it in again.
- Creation is a series of stratified levels. Each level is a kind of world, and beings occupy those worlds using appropriate bodies—physical, energetic, emotional, mental or spiritual.
- These bodies reside figuratively one inside the other, like the skins of an onion or a set of babushka dolls. Together they make up the whole being. They are real bodies, not merely metaphors.
- In order to make the spiritual journey, a great deal (or all) of the baggage that constitutes the possessions, conceptions and desires of the individual ego or "small self" must be abandoned.
- Actions bring appropriate results. "What goes around comes around." However, this karmic process may be overridden by

⁹ Prabhavananda, S., and Isherwood, C. *Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God*, Introduction, pp. 6-7.

renunciation of the fruits of actions or by the intervention of a compassionate being and/or Divine Mercy.

- Even within what might be termed Enlightenment, there are gradations and levels, and these have been mapped and described.

There has also been broad agreement across religions that certain institutions, relationships and practices are necessary or helpful, including:

- A foundation of right conduct based on sacred law
- Lineages of enlightened teachers and students who succeed them
- The individual relationship between an enlightened teacher and an aspiring student
 - The transmission of awareness and energy through initiation
 - The repetition of sacred words or names, often counted on the fingers or on prayer beads
 - Methods including prayer, meditation, control of breath, contemplation, study, movement, music, good works, love for holy beings and asceticism or renunciation of various types.

The universal conception of creation and existence across the core of religions can be pictured by returning to our original diagram. In the center is Pure Being: Formless, Timeless Awareness¹⁰. It creates, becomes, or projects out from Itself various descending levels of manifestation, which grow comparatively weaker, darker, and further apart as they travel out from Undifferentiated Oneness. The first manifestations of difference are Light and Sound. The next is God with Qualities, such as the Hindu trinity of Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer and the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names (or aspects) of God in Islam. Bliss and ecstasy enter in very early in the process—somewhere between the Primordial Essence and the God with Qualities. One school of Hinduism sees the Divine Being as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*:

Existence-Knowledge-Bliss.

¹⁰ In reality this Awareness is everywhere, yet this Circle is a useful conception for understanding an aspect of divine and human functioning.

Moving outward from Essence with and without Attributes, we encounter what look more and more like separate beings: devas (gods), angels, and prophets and saints of different gradations and types, including such intriguing designations as Islam's *muqarrabin*, the "near ones". All the higher levels are drenched in peace, ecstasy, clarity and beauty. These levels may be experienced on earth as well as after death, since paradise is a mode of consciousness, not a physical location.

Existence near the center of the circle is reported to be so unlike earthly life that it defies analogy. These are worlds in or beyond the region of Plato's Ideal Forms, Jungian archetypes, and the highest reaches of Edward Abbott's *Flatland*. As we move further outward the scene becomes more earthlike, but even this is not easily describable. Traditional imagery of banquets, gardens, harps and thrones are as effective as descriptions of a beautiful sunset or of being in love. For those who have tasted the experience they serve as an evocative reminder. To others they seem flat, silly and naive.

The circle extends yet further outward and downward through spheres influenced by spirit, higher mind (intellect), lower mind, emotion, energy and matter, the last being the universe our physical bodies occupy. With each descent there is, in one sense, more differentiation, but there is also less clarity, more negativity and more conflict between beings and aims that appear increasingly divergent.

Moving outward and downward from the highest and deepest divine levels, we encounter known or hidden saints (in Islam, *awlia*, Friends of God); then good people living honorably as best they can; then ordinary people trying

to get by; then autocrats, venal politicians and criminals large and small; and finally, at the periphery of the circle, the monsters in human form whose actions frequently make the morning news such an unfit companion for toast and orange juice.

The journey of the spirit is pictured in world religions as moving toward ever increasing levels of wisdom and compassion. To understand what appear to be evil manifestations of religion, it is first necessary to understand that *your* “freedom fighter” may be *my* terrorist, on the well known principle of, “I’m determined; you’re stubborn. I’m flexible; you’re wishy-washy.” In an old story, a Britisher mentions Benedict Arnold to an American. “You mean the great American traitor?” asks the American. “No,” replies the other. “I mean the great British patriot.”

But laying aside the perennial human prejudice in favor of ourselves and against the other, it should be born in mind that the Machiavellian manipulators and heartless sociopaths on the outer periphery of the circle can easily clothe themselves in religious garb for its power of swaying the masses—just as they can wrap themselves in the high-sounding flags of Freedom and Democracy.

It seems that a few basic disagreements are both serious and irreconcilable. Is Ultimate Reality personal or impersonal? Does Divinity ever incarnate? Do beings *reincarnate*? And does the individual soul persist or does it merge back into the All? It is necessary and respectful not to gloss over real differences in seeking similarities, for example, worship of the guru in some faiths versus commandments against idolatry in others. Yet it is just possible that even these issues may turn out, from a fully Awakened or Enlightened viewpoint, to be

matters terminology and perspective. Ramakrishna begins a story, “A salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean . . .”